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ABSTRACT

This handbook documents the ingredients necessary to create successful school-sponsored special education parent support groups. Common characteristics observed in parent groups are outlined, along with principles of effective group functioning, benefits accruing to parents, and benefits for school systems. Also discussed is the assistance offered by the Special Education Resource Network of the California State Department of Education to individuals or schools which are interested in developing a parent support group. Case studies are presented as examples of how school districts are implementing active and vital support systems for parents of special education students. The three case studies focus on: Puente Hills Special Education Local Planning Area "First STEP" (Support Team of Educators and Parents); Santa Monica/Malibu Unified School District "Parents Supporting Parents" and Norwalk-La Mirada-ABC Special Education Local Planning Area "TALK" (Try a Little Kindness). Appendices include newspaper clippings about the groups and copies of brochures describing the groups' activities in English and Spanish. (JDD)

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Educators and Parents Working Together to Develop Special Education Parent Support Groups

Statewide Edition

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INTRODUCTION

The passage of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975 and the implementation of the California Master Plan for Special Education both called for increased involvement between educators and parents of students enrolled in special education programs. These laws and regulations provided more clearly defined rights and procedural safeguards for parents and strongly encouraged increased parental participation in planning and programming for students with special needs.

The late 1970s became a period of educators and parents adjusting to shifting expectations, roles, and responsibilities. The transition was not always an easy one. Even though the requirement for parent/educator involvement was increased, there was usually no existent mechanism or method in place to assure that special educators and parents would have the opportunity to collaborate in a positive and mutually productive fashion. Fortunately, during this initial transition period, many special educators and parent groups persevered through the initial stresses and continued to look for ways to positively work together.

Gradually, mechanisms began to develop from within the school systems to encourage effective collaboration between the school staff and parents of children with special needs. One such structure that emerged during the 1980s was the special education parent support group. This unique cooperative enterprise which

links the needs of special educators and parents of children with handicapping conditions is the subject of this paper.

Parents of children with special needs have long been forming and participating in mutual support groups around disability, medical, and educational issues. These groups traditionally have been started by, composed of, and governed solely by, parents. Historically, these groups were formed to provide services which were denied their children by the existing system. A further reason to draw parents together was to put pressure on the system and society in general to accept their children with their differences and to provide public services for them.

A major need that was fulfilled by these groups was that of emotional support and understanding. Support groups provided parents a safe place to share their struggles and acknowledge one another for their victories.

These self-help parent support groups represented an important stage in the movement toward parents organizing to receive support for themselves and their children. Since then, we've come a long way in the areas of public awareness, civil rights, and legislative safeguards for children with handicapping conditions. Parents who have struggled long and hard recognize the tremendous changes and efforts made by professionals, especially in the area of education. While parents are not about to relax their vigilance, they realize there is a new game plan.

It is no longer "us against them."

What we have noticed recently is the growth of the realization by educators and parents that we are all on the same team. Parents are finding that support groups which were formerly used to oppose the system now can find a safe harbor within the system. Professionals are finding that active parent groups can be a source of strength to them and can help in building and maintaining higher quality services. The climate of trust that develops can nourish emotional support for both groups in helping them meet the daily challenges of their roles.

To some, both parents and professionals alike, this is a radical concept. To others, it is the result of long years of the nurturing and cultivation of attitudes.

SERN 3 (the Los Angeles area regional unit of the Special Education Resource Network), recognizing this evolutionary trend toward "working together for quality service," has made studying and assisting in the formation of district and agency sponsored parent support groups a priority. In the spring of 1984, SERN 3 staff began a series of study sessions by brainstorming ideas about the "ingredients" necessary to create successful special education parent support groups. The results of those efforts are reported here.

The SERN 3 region has assisted four parent support groups which

are sponsored by educational or service agencies. They are in various stages of formation and operation and all vary in form, goals, and activities. The groups are First STEP of Hacienda-La Puente School District; TALK of Norwalk-La Mirada-ABC SELPA; Parents Supporting Parents of Santa Monica/Malibu Unified School District; and a Parent Support Group at East Los Angeles Regional Center.

In summary, as parent support groups move into the future there seems to be a broadening of perspective and increased acceptance by professionals. There is a beginning trend toward district and agency sponsored parent support groups which provide emotional support, as well as information and skill building for parents and professionals.

WHAT A SCHOOL/AGENCY PARENT SUPPORT GROUP IS

Parent support groups initiated and operated collaboratively by school systems and parents are a relatively new special education service concept. As previously mentioned, parents of individuals with special needs have banded together to form and operate self-help support groups long before the current trend toward parental participation in special education programs. But it is just recently that we have seen public schools take a proactive role in establishing support systems for parents within the school system. At the present time it is difficult to specifically define the special education support group model because the concept is still evolving and each school system that we have observed is implementing their parent support group differently and according to local needs. However, we have observed some common characteristics in all the parent groups that have been identified. These common characteristics of presently established groups are as follows:

1) **THE PARENT SUPPORT GROUP IS A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT BETWEEN PARENTS AND SCHOOL PERSONNEL**

The effort is driven by a positive, motivating force. Parents and school personnel jointly band together to cooperatively work together for the betterment of special education students and their families. Historically, most parent support groups have been formed in reaction to a negative condition; usually the lack of services or poor quality of services. The new models of parent support groups that are emerging from within the school system are a proactive response by parents and school personnel who are jointly committed to quality services for special education students.

2) **THE PRIMARY FOCUS OF THE GROUP IS FOR PARENTS TO PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR EACH OTHER**

This support is in a large part emotional. Parents who themselves have been through the same life crisis related to parenting a child with special needs and have worked their way through the feeling states associated with these "passages" are uniquely suited to provide real support to other parents who are having similar experiences. Parent to parent support may also take the form of resource sharing, activity planning, or peer "coaching" and solving specific problems or achieving goals.

3) **THE PARENT SUPPORT GROUP PROVIDES A FORUM FOR PARENTS AND SCHOOL STAFF TO REGULARLY COMMUNICATE AND SHARE INFORMATION AND CONCERNS**

The support group becomes a communication vehicle that allows parents and school personnel to remain consistently in contact with one another. Critical issues and concerns can be dealt with in a timely manner as they arise.

4) **THE GROUP IS A STRUCTURED MECHANISM**

The form and structure varies. Some district groups hold regularly scheduled meetings open to all parents. Other groups have chosen to train a small "core" group of parents who are on call to provide individual support to any parent of a special needs child within the school system.

5) **THE PARENT SUPPORT GROUP IS A SCHOOL SPONSORED GROUP SEPARATE AND DISTINCT FROM OTHER PARENT/TEACHER OR COMMUNITY GROUPS**

There appears to be a value to establishing a special structure and identity for the support group that is as distinct from existing established organizations such as the PTA or the Special Education Community or District Advisory Committee. This is not to say that parent support groups could not be related to such organizations. However, some separate and distinct structure for the group has been sanctioned in all school systems or agencies that have been observed.

HOW A SCHOOL/AGENCY PARENT SUPPORT GROUP WORKS

From our observations of these initial school system efforts to establish parent support groups, some basic operating principles have been discerned that contribute further toward a definition of the school sponsored special education parent support group. These basic principals are:

1) **SUPPORT AND COMMITMENT IS EVIDENCED BY KEY SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS**

   District special education administrators provide initial support to the group by providing their own time, the time of key staff members, and other district resources necessary to establish a working group.

2) **A SMALL CORE GROUP OF PARENT LEADERS IS FORMED AND THE PLANNING AND DIRECTION OF THE PARENT SUPPORT GROUP IS UNDERTAKEN JOINTLY BY THIS CORE GROUP AND THE SCHOOL STAFF LIAISON AND OTHER INVOLVED STAFF**

   This joint leadership is begun immediately following the school system (a school district or a special education regional consortium of school districts) decision to initiate a parent support group.

3) **THE COORDINATION OF THE GROUP AND THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR SUCCESSFULLY ESTABLISHING THE GROUP IS ASSIGNED TO ONE PAID PERSON AND A SPECIFIC AMOUNT OF TIME IS ALLOTTED THAT PERSON TO ESTABLISH AND SERVE AS AN ADMINISTRATIVE LIAISON TO THE GROUP**

   In cases observed to date, this person has been a special education or pupil personnel staff member. This person acts as a staff liaison to the group and is available on a regular basis for consultation or any problems parents may have in supporting other parents.

4) **THE LEADERSHIP OF THE GROUP IS CLEARLY COMMITTED TO SUPPORTING THE SCHOOL SYSTEM**

   The group is intended to be a "safe place" to voice concerns and issues related to the schools, and, at the same time support the school system, as well as one another.

5) **THE PARENT SUPPORT GROUP BECOMES A VEHICLE FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS TO UNIFY FORCES IN ORDER TO ASSURE QUALITY SERVICES**

The group remains a support network for quality special education programs within the school system. The group or members of the group can act informally to negotiate conflicts between parents and staff, but the core group of parents and the staff liaison assures that the group avoids adversarial interaction with the schools.

6) **THE SCHOOL SPONSORED PARENT SUPPORT GROUP HAS BEEN OBSERVED TO PROVIDE THE FOLLOWING FUNCTIONS:**

1) Information is presented.

2) Information is shared and exchanged.

3) Help and coaching in dealing with the educational and other service systems is provided.

4) Training in skill development is provided.

5) Parent volunteer activity in the schools is coordinated.

6) Parent input toward school system policy and system change is received.

7) **ONGOING OPEN COMMUNICATION IS FACILITATED**

The free and open expression of parent feelings and concerns is encouraged without such communication becoming a counseling or therapy session. When regular group meetings are held, a skilled facilitator is required who can model effective listening and communication skills and insure that the open expression of feelings is productively channeled. When the primary support mechanism is one-to-one parent support, it is helpful for the "Supporting Parents" to meet regularly with a facilitator who can help the core group identify strategies for handling any difficult situations they may be confronting.

8) **IN ORDER TO GET THE PARENT SUPPORT GROUP "OFF THE GROUND", INTENSIVE TEAM BUILDING SESSIONS HAVE BEEN OBSERVED TO BE OF GREAT VALUE**

A team building workshop offered by the Special Education Resource Network provided this "kickoff" assistance to three groups that have initiated support groups. In other areas, parent leaders and school

staff have met over a longer period of time in order to build the organizational framework and the group "esprit de corps."

9) **REGULAR MEETINGS OCCUR**

Meetings are held regularly by the core group of parent supporters and/or the larger parent support group. When larger group meetings for district or agency parents are conducted, there appears to be a need for both day and evening meetings. Day meetings facilitate school system staff participation and allow parents to participate when child care is provided by the school. Evening meetings promote working parent and couple participation. Schedules which allow for both day and evening meetings are ideal.

10) **A DELIBERATE EFFORT IS MADE TO MODEL PARENT/STAFF PARTNERSHIPS IN THE LEADERSHIP OF MEETINGS AND TRAINING ACTIVITIES**

Successful special education parent support groups involve both parents and staff in initially planning the group as well as planning and organizing the meetings and activities of the group. Most groups start with a small core group of committed parents and a special education staff person. This small group serves as a "steering committee" for support group activities. When a large group meets, the special educator and parents jointly share the responsibilities for planning and conducting meetings.

11) **SUPPORT GROUP TOPICS FREQUENTLY HAVE PERSONAL VALUE TO PARENTS THAT RELATE TO AREAS AND RELATIONSHIPS IN THEIR LIFE BEYOND PARENT/SCHOOL RELATIONS**

The parent motivation to participate in the support group is increased when topics are focused on issues that relate to areas of personal value such as interpersonal skills, negotiation techniques, parenting skill, etc.

12) **THERE IS A COMMITMENT TO ONGOING TRAINING FOR MEMBERS OF THE GROUP**

Some sample training topics that have been provided are listening skills, communication skills, problem solving skills, legal rights, the IEP process, district policies and procedures, community resources, and emotional issues related to parenting a child with special needs.

BENEFITS TO PARENTS

Parents with special needs children have heightened stresses in most aspects of their family life. They are in a constant process of adjusting to these stresses as well as to the changing needs of their children.

In order to cope and to grow from this process of adjustment, parents may need to share their thoughts and, most importantly, their feelings. This sharing must be done with someone who is willing to listen and who is trusted. A parent who is dealing with similar problems is often the ideal listener.

Frequently, in times of conflict or crisis, one of the key ingredients that helps the parent see hope, is the "living example" of another parent and child who have gone through it before. Parents in parent support groups can become especially effective helpers of one another when they are afforded the opportunity to receive training in effective listening and communication skills. Again, in times that some parents find difficult, parents may receive information and guidance from helping staff members; but, by having the opportunity to talk talk about the content as well as their feelings with another parent, parents may become better able to internalize or thoroughly process the information, and act on it.

Parent support groups sponsored by school districts can set up structures that fulfill a wide range of parent needs. The result

of support group activities provide several direct benefits to parents:

- **Parents have the opportunity to freely express their thoughts and feelings with one another in an emotionally supportive atmosphere.** The feeling of being alone is lessened as parents find out there are others with similar struggles and concerns.

- **Support groups provide parents a safe structure in which to "unwind and unload"** in a safe, supportive atmosphere instead of wearing down friends and family with their struggles and frustrations.

- **Parents can experience a sense of "making a difference" for other parents and also for the school system.** A sense of belonging and being a part of the special education system is promoted.

- **Parents can provide validation and feedback to one another.** Parents need a place to celebrate even their smallest victories. This mutual parent acknowledgement of successes gives the members of the group the strength and motivation to keep striving toward completion of their goals.

- **The parent support group body becomes a resource exchange network.** Parents can freely exchange information on resources and services that can provide much needed assistance to their children and families.

Parents have a place to bring school related problems. Because parents who are involved in school sponsored support groups are consistently communicating with other parents and school staff representatives, there is less opportunity for problems to "fester" and become significant conflicts. The support group becomes a "preventive" conflict reduction mechanism that allows parents to deal with issues and concerns as they arise rather than allowing problems to grow to crisis proportion.

- **The group provides parents with access to needed information.** Support group parents work closely with school system or agency staff who have current information on issues effecting parents and staff. Staff members and other parents frequently have books or articles related to parenting skills or special education that can be shared.

- **The support group provides parents with the opportunity to receive useful training.** Parents can receive the benefits of training sessions in a wide range of topics related to special education and parenting a child with special needs.

- **Support groups provide parents with the opportunity to receive peer coaching support.** Frequently one parent is able to "see" another parent's situation in a more objective manner. Or another parent may have already

confronted an issue or problem and achieved a workable resolution. The group offers parents the chance to use one another informally as "coaches" in order to solve problems and pursue family related goals.

- o **Finally, the support group can serve to reduce stress for parents.** "Stress management" literature and trainings have abounded in recent years. Most major authorities in the field of stress reduction suggest the creation of personal support systems to counter stressful conditions.* Support groups become a personal resource pool for parents who find themselves comparing similar stress producing circumstances that are associated with parenting a special child.

* Charles Seashore, "Developing and Using a Personal Support System."

BENEFITS TO SCHOOL SYSTEMS

School system sponsored parent support groups have the potential to meet many needs that are common to both parents and educators. The benefits to parents described above also enhance the school system capability to deliver a quality program of special education services. There also exists a distinct set of advantages to the school system for providing an active sponsorship of a parent support group that operates within the system. Some of these benefits to schools are:

- o **Parent support groups can create a regularly scheduled opportunity for special education staff and parents to communicate on a positive and mutually supportive basis.**

  The support group can become a vehicle for school staff who have worked hard to develop effective learning experiences for students to communicate their programs to the parents and to receive acknowledgement and validation for their contribution.

- o **Support groups allow both parents and staff to understand more clearly the stresses, trials, and difficulties that they are confronting.** Educators receive little preservice training that allows them to know the total experience of the family that includes a child with a handicapping condition. Parent and educator sharing in support groups creates an increased sensitivity to the stresses that are placed on the parents

and the family of children with handicapping conditions. This understanding of the "larger picture" enables the special educator to communicate better with parents and to teach the child more knowingly. The support group also allows parents the opportunity to become more familiar with the problems, stresses, and demands that are experienced by the special educator.

- o Parent support groups provide agencies or school systems and parents with a way to directly communicate with one another. Usually a good deal of indirect parent-school staff communication takes place within any given systems; i.e., parents naturally talk to other parents about staff and vice versa. When there is a high frequency and volume of this type of communicating, "rumor mills" begin to emerge and problems occur. The support group concept provides parents and staff with a common forum for directly communicating and receiving "first hand" information from one another.

- o Parent support groups which are jointly operated by a consortium of individual school districts can serve to increase the cohesiveness of the consortium. When individual school districts share their programs, an increased awareness and understanding of these programs is achieved by the other districts in the consortium. As districts hear of programs that parents have developed in another district, they are more

readily able to institute similar programs in their areas.

- o **Parent support groups provide public relations benefits to school systems.** Activities undertaken by parent support groups frequently make excellent copy for local news publications.

- o **The support group is an effective vehicle for advocating for special education students.** Members of the parent support group can act as advocates for the support and funding of special education programs in the community and work to protect existent provisions for funding of special education programs at the state and federal level.

- o **The support group helps meet district training and staff development objectives.** Members of the parent support group can act as advocates for the support and funding of special education programs at the state and federal level.

- o **There are definite indications that parent support groups are cost effective means of achieving parent/professional cooperation in school systems and agencies.** District administrators involved with support groups have reported instances of support group mechanisms avoiding costly and time consuming formal conflicts between school administrators and parents. In some cases, district parents who expressed

dissatisfaction with the special education placement for their child have been referred to the parent support group. Through the efforts of the district facilitator of the group and parents in the group, either a more satisfactory placement was negotiated or, in some cases, an improved understanding and acceptance of the need for the present placement resulted. Some parents, with help from other parents, have visited school programs and agreed to a placement at an earlier time than might have otherwise occurred without the intervention of a parent who had been through a similar experience. In summary, the school sponsored parent support group model appears to offer some distinct advantages to school districts as well as to parents. Many educators have been looking for a model to provide support and training to parents while at the same time improving relationships between parents and special educators. The parent support group model achieves both these purposes in a cost effective manner.

HOW SERN CAN ASSIST SCHOOL SYSTEMS AND AGENCIES TO DEVELOP PARENT SUPPORT GROUPS

The Special Education Resource Network (SERN) Los Angeles area office is prepared to offer assistance to school systems or districts who are interested in developing their own support group for parents of children with special needs. Each school district or agency and the parents served will have a unique set of needs and goals for their group. Each parent support group will evolve differently as a result of differing local needs. Even though there is no one parent support group model for districts or agencies to duplicate, SERN is prepared to offer the following types of guidance and assistance to parent support group developers:

1) Help to determine the best assessment methods to meet the needs of your parents and staff.

2) Provide literature (see bibliography) describing support group models and techniques for helping you to establish your group.

3) Arrange visitations for district staff and/or parents to existing support group models.

4) Assist districts or agencies with advance planning in order to insure adequate parent and staff participation in support group activities.

5) Provide workshops specifically aimed at developing a parent support group.

6) Help your district or agency to develop a plan of action to begin a parent support group.

7) Provide continued support during the implementation of the support group as requested by the district or agency.

Further general information and more specific technical assistance can be provided by contacting a SERN Parent Specialist at the SERN 3 office (213/450-0644).

CASE STUDIES

Note: The following case studies are offered as examples of how school districts or special education regional planning areas are implementing active and vital support systems for parents of special education students. These examples are written to illustrate the school sponsored parent support group concept. It is not intended to offer a prescription for how other areas might implement similar programs. Every school system and parent group will evolve differently, according to their own local conditions and needs.

CASE STUDY # 1

The Puente Hills SELPA

(The Puente Hills SELPA [Special Education Local Planning Area] is composed of the Hacienda La Puente Unified School District and the Rowland Unified School District)

"FIRST STEP"

(Support Team of Educators and Parents)

In 1981, the district Director of Special Education in the Hacienda La Puente School District decided to take a different tack toward providing parent involvement in the special education programs for which he was responsible. He didn't know exactly what the strategy would be, but he had a kind of sense for the direction that the district and the SELPA (the Puente Hills Special Education Local Planning Area) needed to move toward -- a sense of what effective parent involvement might look like. Some kind of special education parent/school interaction was needed that was proactive in reaching out to parents, rather than reactive to problem situations. A mechanism was needed that was deliberately structured to produce support for parents who wanted the best for their children, and, at the same time, provided support to a staff of special educators that was operating a program that he knew was good for kids.

His first step was to assign a key person on his staff that he

felt could make such a program happen. He needed someone who could get something started and provide the impetus for action. He also needed someone who could facilitate real communication among parents and between parents and staff. He picked one of his most energetic, competent and caring staff members for the job. She was a program specialist and a school psychologist with a wealth of experience in special education and an already solid rapport with parents. After accepting the assignment, she began the job by looking for resources to help align key staff and parent leaders with the idea of a cooperative enterprise.

She heard about a workshop available through the state staff development system (SERN - Special Education Resource Network). The workshop offered an intensive three day training experience designed to enhance educator/parent communication and to provide the opportunity for planning future parent/school collaboration activities. She arranged for the workshop to be presented in the area to a group of parent leaders and key special educators. The workshop proved to be a stimulating experience which created a common bond between the participating parents and staff. More importantly, the training experience resulted in an enthusiastic willingness on the part of members of the group to commit to further action. On the third day of the workshop, the entire group, consisting of parents, administrators, and pupil personnel staff decided to develop a parent educator support group, which would soon become dubbed, "First STEP" (Support Team of Educators and Parents). The group has now been meeting for three years.

Over fifty special education parents participate in the program. Attendance at the meetings ranges between fifteen and thirty-five. Special education staff members are always represented at the meetings. The monthly meetings are held on a weekday morning for two to three hours in a district office multi-purpose room. Three additional evening meetings are held each year to encourage working parent and couple participation.

Each meeting starts with members of the group sharing information and recent experiences. The parent to parent sharing remains the most valued aspect of the support group according to "First STEP" parent participants. Parents freely express their feelings as well as share information. The results are frequently powerful. Parents are provided with a safe, supportive environment in which to share their emotional reactions to the obstacles with which they find themselves constantly confronted.

Usually, a guest speaker is invited to address an issue of concern to the group or to provide some form of specific training. A lawyer was invited to address parents on the issue of guardianships and wills. A psychologist provided an overview of the "Systematic Training for Effective Parenting" to the group. Following this presentation, the group discussed ways that the training could be offered within the school system to parents of students in special education programs. A representative from the County INFO service described the information and referral services available to parents, and explained to the group how to use the service to access the scores of social and human service

programs available in Los Angeles County. Presentations are also given by school system personnel regarding programs offered through the schools. During one such presentation, the vocational and career awareness program was described and parents were provided with suggestions for developing such skills in coordination with school programs.

Parents regularly exchange information and resources with one another. Community service information is shared. Written information or articles of interest may be duplicated and distributed to the group. Announcements are made regarding upcoming district events or training opportunities that might be of interest to parents.

The "First STEP" group is closely tied to a volunteer program within the school system. Many of the parents in the group also volunteer in the "KIDS" project. These parents are trained to go in to the neighborhood schools within the system and make presentations to classes with non-disabled children on the nature of handicapping conditions. The "First STEP" support group remains closely allied to the "KIDS" project, and the satisfaction that the parent volunteers' experience lends an additional bonding force to the cohesion and stability of the group.

In conclusion, the "First STEP" project offers a clear demonstration that it is possible for school systems to offer parents a support mechanism that not only serves the needs of parents, but also creates a parent support network for the school

system.

Perhaps parent support groups do represent a different tack. In the past, it seems as if most of our efforts to p ovide parent "education" have been things educators have wanted to do to parents to somehow make them better able to help their children, and, as a consequence, better able to support special education programs. Helping parents through providing support groups requires us to use a slightly different process. We work with parents to provide support for parents. A different tack.....or a different place to come from?

CASE STUDY # 2

Santa Monica/Malibu Unified School District

"PARENTS SUPPORTING PARENTS"

Santa Monica/Malibu Unified School District has a very strong District Advisory Committee (DAC) for special education. This group, through its monthly meetings and its involvement with the Tri-Cities SELPA (Santa Monica-Malibu, Beverly Hills, and Culver City Unified School Districts) Community Advisory Committee (CAC) has been providing a wide range of information to parents. DAC presentations have included both staff and parents and have ranged from "hands-on" computer experience to an evening on transitioning from high school. One subcommittee maintains a collection of books on special education at a local public library; another publishes a newsletter. Involved parents have generally felt that the district has responded favorably to them in their role as advisors.

Thus, the information and participation needs of parents are being met through the DAC and its various subcommittees. In 1981, a group of parents began discussing another need that they felt had to be dealt with in a structured way with district assistance. These parents wanted a mechanism to share emotional support among

themselves and to make such support available to parents district-wide; those with children already in special education and those just coming into the system.

In the fall of 1983, when the DAC determined its priorities for the year, the committee made the formation of a parent support group a major goal. A parent chairman was named. The chairman organized a series of planning meetings that began in the spring of 1984 and continued monthly through the summer. Simultaneously, the director of special education used consultants to gain information and to look at the forms that parent support groups have taken in other places.

The director attended the first two meetings. He brought a district psychologist to the second meeting, whom he assigned as staff liaison to the group, and who has since been a unifying and supportive force. His continued presence and understanding gives legitimacy to the support group and is a concrete sign of the district's commitment to the success of the group.

At the planning sessions the group:

- clarified the group's goals
- decided on training topics to meet these goals
- decided on the training format
- came to a consensus on a name and logo
- designed a brochure
- prepared a presentation to the DAC to introduce "Parents Supporting Parents" to the district

The goal of Parents Supporting Parents is to provide emotional

support and to share resources and information with other special education parents in the district through a trained core of parent volunteers who receive phone calls from other parents at any time.

To begin the training of these "supporting parents" a three-day workshop was held in October 1984. The workshop, offered through SERN (Special Education Resource Network), was attended by 20 people, ten parents and ten staff. Topics emphasized were communication and listening skills, problem solving, psychological and emotional processes, assertiveness, and awareness of other parent groups.

Since the October "kick off" training, Parents Supporting Parents has met monthly to continue its planning, training, and mutual support for the core volunteer parent group. Brochures are being distributed explaining the goals and services of the parent support system and how to get in touch with a Supporting Parent, or how to join the core group.

Members are beginning to receive phone calls from parents directly, and,in some cases, from school staff who then arrange a connection with one of the parents in the core group.

At this point in its development, both parents and the district are enthusiastic and committed to maintaining a viable support group. All involved keep foremost in their minds the easing of the emotional burdens and sense of isolation that parents experience at various times during the growth of their children

with special needs. And as a result all expect to see a higher level of trust and collaboration between parents and professionals. The ultimate goal is stronger families and stronger programs for the children.

CASE STUDY # 3

Norwalk-La Mirada-ABC SELPA

"TALK"

(Try a Little Kindness)

In the spring of 1983 the Community Advisory Committee of Norwalk-La Mirada-ABC formed a new sub committee called the Inservice and Parent Support Committee. For the next two years this committee met conscientiously to define their goals and structure, to plan and implement their training, and to build up a sense of team among themselves.

This committee was made up of parents, school staff, and administrators. They met as a group and asked outside facilitators (including SERN 3 staff) to help them for some meetings and trainings.

In one of their first meetings they gave themselves the name "TALK", or "Try a Little Kindness." The name explains their purpose: to support parents of children with disabilities in coping with the emotional aspects of the disability as well as to deal with their children's education.

To accomplish its purpose, TALK will provide parents in the SELPA

(Special Education Local Planning Area) a list of telephone numbers of trained volunteers who are available to talk and listen and support. The volunteers are both parents with children in special education and education staff.

During the past two years these volunteers have met for nine training sessions. They received information and skill practice in the needed areas they targeted in their planning:

- communication and listening (utilizing role playing)
- handling telephone calls
- community resources
- coping with disability
- the Individualized Education Program process
- SELPA and district policies

At this stage in its development, TALK has finished its initial training period and is designing a brochure for distribution to parents and staff.

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When You Reach Out To Others...You Are Not Alone: A Guide for Developing Your Own Parent Support Group, Upper Valley Support Group, P.O. Box 622, Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

You Are Not Alone: A Supportive Handbook for Parents of Children with Special Needs, Upper Valley Support Group, P.O. Box 622, Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Special education project awarded

The Board of Education of the Hacienda La Puente Unified School District announced that the district's special education department received an exemplary program award from the Los Angeles County Board of Education for its project, "First Step."

Developed and administered under the direction of Marilyn Ferrara, the district's Search and Serve specialist, First Step helps parents of special education students help one another with common concerns and questions regarding their children and school programs.

According to Ferrara, First Step has provided a network of trained special education parents representing all the handicapping areas servicing the entire special education local planning area (Hacienda La Puente School District, Rowland School District, and Los Angeles County).

These parents provide support and direction to new special education parents.

"There is less duplication of services and minimal cost as the parents all volunteer their time and talent," Ferrara said.

The group has been actively involved over a two-year period and meets monthly. There has been an increased enrollment and presently there are over 50 parents who participate in some way to improve communication between special education and the regular program.

Ferrara explained that First Step has developed written mainstreaming programs, materials and aids, lists of handicapped presentors, and interagency resource materials which are available to other districts.

The project has become a model for other districts and parent groups. Ferrara said many requests for materials and information have been responded to from districts, university classes, and special education personnel throughout Los Angeles County.

Ferrara accepted the award certificate on behalf of the district from Lawrence J. Kaplan, D.D.S., S.I.C.D., who is currently serving as President of the Los Angeles County Board of Education.

—*Highlander Community News*, July 13, 1983

Parents are urged to try to TALK things out

By Robin Newgent
Staff Writer

NORWALK — Parents of children with physical or learning disabilities have a unique set of problems to deal with.

In addition to coping with emotional aspects of the disability, parents have to deal with their children's education.

That's why a program entitled "TALK," or "Try a Little Kindness," was developed as a joint venture between the ABC and Norwalk-La Mirada unified school districts.

"The purpose of TALK is to be a support for parents of disabled children and to inform and educate the parents about the special education program," said Peggy Bennet, director of special education for the Norwalk-La Mirada district.

When implemented in the spring, TALK will provide parents of disabled children in both districts a list of telephone numbers of volunteers who will help them deal with problems associated with their child's education.

Most phone counselors are either parents who have handicapped students themselves or an educator who deals with the special education program in some capacity.

"It's helpful to talk to different people who've been in the same situation," said Jay Wilbur, special education director for the ABC district.

Wilbur spoke to a group of nine volunteers who will take calls from parents as soon as they have finished training.

"People think special education means crutches and wheelchairs, but it's more than that," he said.

The volunteers who met for nine sessions of intensive training are informed about how the districts handle special education for disabled youngsters and can answer parents' concerns about special education curriculum, procedures, and policies.

Among those participating is Gerna Stewart of Cerritos. Stewart and her husband have been foster parents since 1967 to several children with Down's Syndrome.

Stewart said she signed up as a phone counselor because she feels there is a need.

"Parents were needed...There seems to be a lot I already know about that I can help another parent with. There are some things I don't know about, but if I can't answer their questions I will send them to someone who can," she said. "A lot of times it will mean just listening."

The special education program set up by the districts is designed to help students with any kind of a handicap, said Bennet. There are 3,900 students enrolled in the program.

This can range from children with hearing or visual problems, youngsters with learning disabilities or mental retardation, to students confined to a wheelchair because of a disease, she said.

The state now mandates that every child, regardless of handicap, must be educated to the level he is capable of handling, said Bennet.

GINGER WILLIAMS
. . .county representative

The mandate also calls for handicapped children to mix with the rest of the student population.

"The law requires disabled students to mingle with non-disabled children as much as possible where applicable," said Bennet.

Therefore, parents need to be kept informed of their child's progress, including when and where the student will be mainstreamed into regular classes.

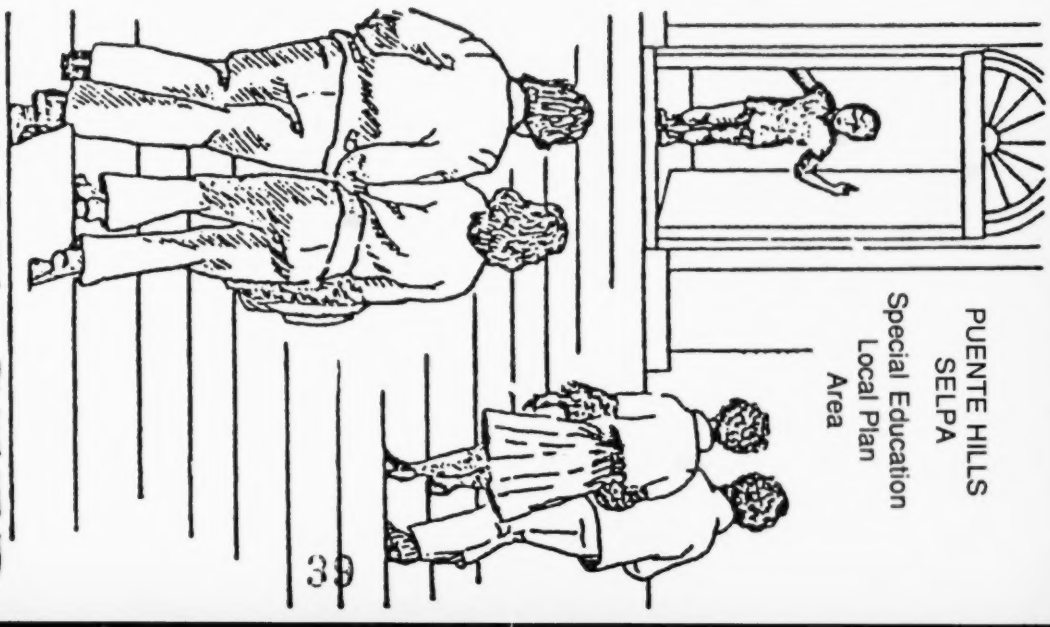
Parents are informed through a individualized education program (IEP) meeting, usually held once a year.

According to Bennet, parents can request a meeting more frequently if the child has problems that must be addressed sooner.

"There are a lot of parents who don't understand procedures and they don't know who to turn to," she said.

FIRST STEP
PUENTE HILLS SPECIAL EDUCATION LOCAL PLAN AREA
Instructional Service Center
15444 Regaldo Street
Hacienda Heights, California 91745

Attn: Marilyn Ferrara



Parents of children in special education feel the need for contact with other parents who have had similar experiences and can best understand their feelings and concerns.

FIRST STEP serves as a link between parents of special education children and parents whose children are just entering the program.

WHO IS A CHILD IN SPECIAL EDUCATION?

A child who:

1. Has learning disabilities, or is educationally retarded.
2. Is deaf, deaf and blind, severely hard of hearing, aphasic, severely language handicapped, or has speech or language problems.
3. Is blind, partially seeing physically or orthopedically handicapped, or has other health problems.
4. Is developmentally handicapped, trainable mentally retarded, autistic, or seriously emotionally disturbed.

Specific goals of FIRST STEP are:

1. Establish a supportive atmosphere which encourages parents to express their feelings, concerns, and questions regarding their children.
2. Offer parents direction and understanding of available school and community services and resources.
3. Inform parents of their rights, including information regarding the IEP process.
4. Present speakers with expertise in various special education areas for parent and staff awareness.

This network for parent support is intended to assist not only the parents of the child with a disability but also for all school staff who have similar concerns for the child. Through a mutual effort new parents can more readily make appropriate decisions concerning their child.

FIRST STEP Parent Volunteers will be happy to contact interested parents on an informal basis. No contact will be made without parent consent.

FIRST STEP will serve parents from:

Hacienda La Puente Unified School District
Rowland Unified School District
Office of Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools

PARENTS INTERESTED IN FIRST STEP SHOULD FILL IN THIS FORM OR CALL:

Hacienda La Puente Unified School District

Marilyn Ferrara SEARCH & SERVE (213) 333-2201 Ext. 326

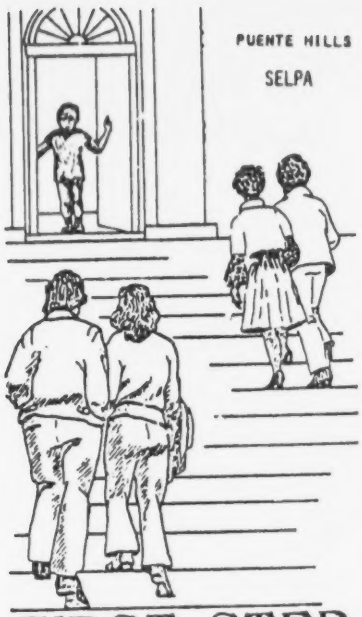
Please fill out and return:

____ I would like to be contacted by a FIRST STEP volunteer.
____ Please contact me_____(date).
____ I would like to receive information regarding FIRST STEP meetings.

Name_____ Telephone_____

Address_____

City_____ State_____ Zip_____



FIRST STEP

PARENTS & TEACHERS
OF
SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

HACIENDA LA PUENTE UNIFIED SCHOOL DIST.
ROWLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
OFFICE OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

YOU ARE INVITED TO A GENERAL EVENING MEETING OF FIRST STEP
(SUPPORT TEAM FOR EDUCATORS AND PARENTS)

DATE: OCTOBER 13, 1983

TIME: 7:30 P.M. - 9:30 P.M.

PLACE: INSTRUCTIONAL SERVICES CENTER
LA SUBIDA SCHOOL
15444 REGALADO STREET
HACIENDA HEIGHTS, CA 91745

GET ACQUAINTED, SHARE INFORMATION, LEARN ABOUT FIRST STEP, AND HEAR FROM A PANEL OF REPRESENTATIVES FROM COMMUNITY RESOURCES.

FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CALL:
MARILYN FERRARA
HACIENDA LA PUENTE USD
(213) 333-2201 EXT. 326

Parents supporting parents

SANTA MONICA-MALIBU
unified school district

Stamp

PARENTS SUPPORTING PARENTS
Dept. of Special Education
Santa Monica/Malibu Unified School District
1723 Fourth Street
Santa Monica, CA 90401

What is Parents Supporting Parents (PSP)?

PSP is a voluntary organization of parents who have experienced mutual support and recognized the need for a network among parents of children with exceptional needs.

Who Are the Members?

The members are parents in the Santa Monica/Malibu Unified School District who have a child with exceptional needs. After receiving special training, they have committed themselves to providing help for other parents.

What Does the Group Do?

Members volunteer their support in the following ways:

1) Talk about everyday problems.
2) Direct parents to available school resources.
3) Explain the IEP process.
4) Inform parents of pertinent community services.
5) Provide information about various disabilities and special education services.

How Do You Contact PSP?

Contact is made by:

1) Calling Maria Richardson, Parent Chairperson, 393-0898, or by
2) Calling Dr. Ebner, District Facilitator of PSP, Santa Monica/ Malibu Unified School District, (213) 393-2785 Ext. 217, or by
3) Completing the form included in this brochure.

PARENTS SUPPORTING PARENTS SANTA MONICA/MALIBU UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
1723 4th Street, Santa Monica, CA 90401

___ I would like to be contacted by a PSP volunteer.

___ I would like to receive information about becoming a member of PSP.

Name_____

Address_____ Tel. ( )_____

City_____ Zip_____

Child's Name_____ Age_____

Disability_____

PADRES AYUDANDO A PADRES
(Parents Supporting Parents)

Distrito Escolar Unificado de
Santa Mónica-Malibu

Estampilla

"PADRES AYUDANDO A PADRES"
(Parents Supporting Parents)

Dept. of Special Education
Santa Monica/Malibu Unified School District
1723 Fourth Street
Santa Monica, CA 90401

¿Qué es "Padres Ayudando a Padres" (PSP)?

Es una organización de padres voluntarios que han experimentado los beneficios de una ayuda mutua y han reconocido la importancia de formar un grupo entre aquéllos que tienen hijos con necesidades excepcionales.

¿Quiénes son los miembros de esta organización?

Los miembros son padres del Distrito Escolar de Santa Mónica-Malibu, cuyos hijos necesitan programas especiales. Después de someterse a un entrenamiento especifico, están dispuestos y preparados para proporcionar ayuda moral a otros padres.

¿Cuáles son las actividades de este grupo?

Los miembros del grupo ofrecen su ayuda, voluntariamente, en las siguientes areas:

1) Platicar sobre problemas de la vida diaria.

2) Explicar el proceso del PEI (Programa de Educación Individualizada).

3) Encaminar a los padres para que consigan los recursos existentes en las escuelas.

4) Informar a los padres de los servicios adecuados que existen en la comunidad.

5) Facilitar información respecto a las diferentes incapacidades y a los servicios de Educación Especial.

¿Cómo se pueden poner en contracto con este grupo?

1) Llamando a María Richardson Madre y Coordinadora, al (213) 393-0898, ó

2) Llamando al Dr. Ebner, Coordinador del Distrito en el grupo, en las oficinas del Distrito Escolar de Santa Monica-Malibu Teléfono (213) 393-2785, extensión 217, ó

3) Llenando la forma en la última par de este folleto.

****
PADRES AYUDANDO A PADRES (Parents Supporting Parents)
****
Distrito Escolar Unificado de Santa Mónica - Malibu
1723 4th Street, Santa Mónica, CA 90401

____ Deseo que un padre voluntario de grupo de "Padres Ayudando a Padres" se ponga en contacto conmigo.

____ Deseo información sobre cómo hacerme padre voluntario.

Nombre _____

Dirección _____ Tel. ( ) _____

Ciudad _____ Zip _____

Nombre de mi hijo/hija _____ Edad ____

Incapacidad _____